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THE INFLUENCE OF LOCAL THEATRICAL CON-
DITIONS UPON THE DRAMA OF
THE GREEKS

ROY C. FLICKINGER

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THE INFLUENCE OF LOCAL THEATRICAL CONDITIONS
UPON THE DRAMA OF THE GREEKS¹

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We are now passing through a period of great interest in the drama. So far as this interest is hysterical or evidenced by attempts at play-writing on the part of those without training, experience, or natural aptitude, it has little to commend it. But, on the other hand, nothing can be more wholesome than a widespread comprehension of the origin, history, and basic principles of tragedy and comedy. Thus we are deeply indebted to the successive scholars who have undertaken to analyze Elizabethan tragedy and assign to Seneca, Aristotle, the Greek playwrights, and the various mediaeval elements their respective shares of influence. As the ultimate source of all other dramatic art, the Greeks' contribution whether in precept or example must ever occupy a peculiar position. And the fact that Greek drama discloses complete dependence upon and reaction to local theatrical conditions may come with a shock of surprise even to many professed classical students. In developing this thesis it is not my purpose to attempt the discovery of any new results, but partly to call attention to the recent work of specialists in the field, partly to point out the frequently unobserved significance of several features of the ancient drama, and finally to arrange under one co-ordinating principle several phenomena which are usually regarded as unrelated.

It is well known that in the earliest extant Greek plays such as the *Suppliants*, *Persians*, and *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus the scene is laid in the open countryside with no house in sight and with no scenic accessories except an altar, tomb, or rock respectively. But that this circumstance was explicable by the character of the Athenian theater did not become evident until Dörpfeld's excava-

¹ Read before the Classical Association of the Middle West and South, Chicago, April 30, 1910.

tions on that site in 1886, 1889, and 1895. It seems that from 499 B.C. until about 465 B.C. the theater at Athens consisted of an orchestral circle nearly eighty feet in diameter and somewhat south of the present orchestra, and an auditorium arranged partly about it on the Acropolis slope. Immediately south of the orchestra was a six-foot declivity, which prevents our supposing the erection of a scene building or backscene there. Only within the orchestra itself, at the center or to one side, might there be constructed for temporary use some such theatrical "property" as an altar or tomb. That such a primitive theater would suffice for the needs of that or even a later period is proved by the remains of the structure at Thoricus, which was never brought to a higher state of development, and by the fact that even at a later period dramatists sometimes voluntarily reverted to this unpretentious stage setting, as in Sophocles' *Oedipus Coloneus*. Consequently, it was inevitable that playwrights of the early fifth century in choosing an imaginary scene for their plays should react to conditions such as I have just described, and normally localize the dramatic action in more or less deserted spots.

About 465 B.C. an advance step in theatrical conditions was taken when a scene building in the form of a temple or palace from which the actors might make their entrances (as well as by the side approaches, as previously) was erected immediately behind the orchestra, where the declivity had previously been. This improvement enabled Aeschylus to introduce a distinct innovation in dramatic technique. Heretofore, death scenes had either been boldly enacted before the spectators' eyes—something always alien to the Greek aesthetic sense—or reported by a messenger; Aeschylus is said to have invented the very effective device of having a character killed behind the scenes during the play. From what was said in the last paragraph it will be understood that the failure of Aeschylus' predecessors to avail themselves of this expedient was due to no lack of inventive genius on their part but simply to the entire absence in their time of a backscene to use for the purpose. It is not known just how long it took Aeschylus to discover this possibility in the new arrangements; but it was certainly not later than the *Oresteia* (458 B.C.), in which Agamemnon's

agonized death cries from behind the scenes still have power to move deeply even modern audiences.¹

One of the most troublesome problems that confront a playwright is inventing plausible motives to explain the entrances and exits of his characters. And though in the interior scene moderns have a marvelously flexible instrument for shifting personages on and off the scene, few can avoid abusing this resource and can repeat Bernard Shaw's boast: "My people get on and off the stage without requiring four doors to a room which in real life would have only one." To the ancient writer the difficulty was still greater; for, though it was fairly easy to motivate a person's coming once to such secluded places as are chosen for the scenes of the three tragedies above cited, a reappearance would prove a more difficult matter, and each additional character complicated the problem still further. Even after the erection of a scene building the situation was only slightly improved, and no further advance (from this point of view) was subsequently made in the theatrical arrangements. All the dramatic personages still had to come to the same (usually a public) place; they could not dodge in at one door and out at another at their creator's caprice, but whether entering or leaving had to walk a considerable distance in plain view of the spectators. Consequently, the ancient dramatist not infrequently frankly abandoned all search for a solution and left the actor standing in idleness during a whole scene or choral ode. Thus, in Aeschylus' *Suppliants* Danaus enters the orchestra with the chorus consisting of his daughters and remains at the altar, without a single word to say, during their parodos of one hundred and seventy-five lines. After a short scene the king appears, and then for over two hundred lines (234-479) Danaus is again ignored. But it was not characteristic of the Greek genius tamely to submit to hindrances, and accordingly we are not surprised that Aeschylus actually secured a striking dramatic effect by leaving characters like Niobe and Achilles for considerable intervals speechless and immovable on the scene. When finally uttered, their startling cries of anguish were greatly enhanced by their previous long-continued silence.²

¹ Cf. *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, XL (1909), 109 ff.

² Cf. Dignan, *The Idle Actor in Aeschylus* (1905).

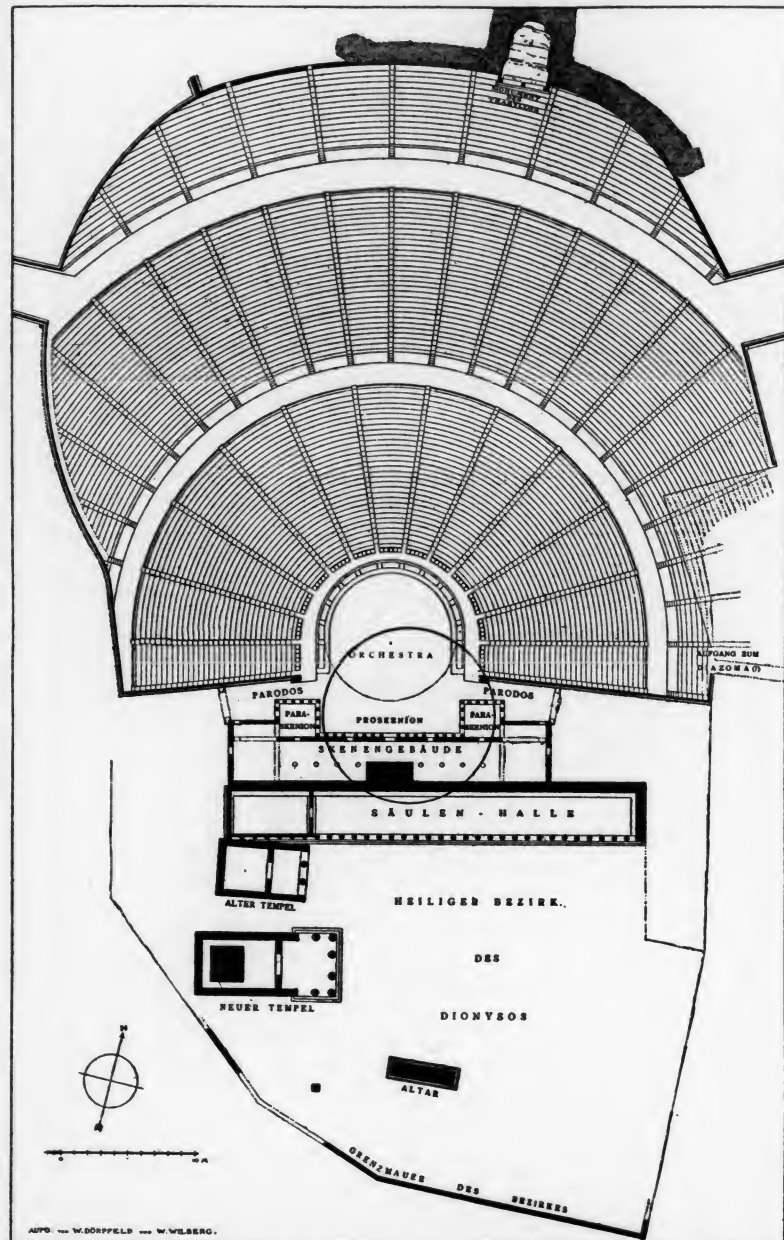
It may not be amiss to note that Molière obtained similar suspense by means quite opposite. In *Tartuffe*, contrary to all the accepted rules, the principal character does not appear upon the scene until after the beginning of the third act. But the conversation and disputes of the other dramatic personages have so inflamed our curiosity concerning him that we can scarcely wait to catch a glimpse of him, and his entrance finally is thrice as effective as if it had come earlier in the play.

It need not be said that the same difficulty of plausible motivation puzzled the comic as well as the tragic writers of antiquity, and they extricated themselves with no less ingenuity in their own way. For the further unfolding of the plot in Plautus' *Pseudolus* it became necessary that that crafty slave should explain to his accomplices certain developments which had already been represented on the scene. Actually to repeat the facts would have been tedious to the spectators, while to motive an exit for all the parties concerned until the information could be imparted and then to motive their re-entrance might have proved difficult and certainly would have caused an awkward pause in the action. The poet, therefore, chose the bolder course of dropping for the moment all dramatic illusion and at the same time of slyly poking fun at the conventions of his art:

horum causa haec agitur spectatorum fabula:

hi [sc. spectatores] sciunt qui hic adfuerunt; uobis post narrauerō (720 f.)—meaning that, if only the audience has all requisite information, the dramatic characters may well go without.

With the scenic arrangements already described and in the absence of a stage and drop curtain the dramatic action was necessarily laid in the open air—usually before a palace or temple. No interior scene could possibly be represented except by the clumsy *ἐκκύκλημα* and several indirect expedients, of which the most common was the messenger's speech. A third evasion of the restriction occurs in the *Hippolytus* (564 ff.), where Phaedra listens at the door to a conversation between her confidential slave and Hippolytus within doors and by her cries and exclamations stirs the audience much more profoundly than the conversation itself could have done. Still again, the dramatists of the New Comedy



PLAN OF THE PRECINCT OF DIONYSUS ELEUTHEREUS AT ATHENS AND OF ITS FOURTH-CENTURY THEATER

The heavy circle shows the position of the orchestra constructed in 499 B.C. (From Dörpfeld and Reisch, *Das griechische Theater*, slightly altered.)

were fond of representing a character in the act of passing through a doorway and shouting back parting injunctions to those within—an artifice which is sufficiently transparent and is justly ridiculed by the poet himself in Terence's *Andria* (490 ff.). Of course, the mildness of a southern climate justifies some practices which might seem strange to more northern peoples, as when Strepsiades and his son in Aristophanes' *Clouds* are disclosed sleeping before their home in the open air, though we have no reason to believe that they are either actual or prospective victims of tuberculosis. Doubtless this difference in weather conditions has something to do with the fact that modern playwrights of the classic school, who, though freed from the material restrictions of the ancients, have yet slavishly imitated them in so much else, have not followed them in this partiality for *alfresco* scenes.

The difficulty inherent in the theatrical arrangements is seen very strikingly in Euripides' *Cyclops*. Here the action would naturally take place in Polyphemus' cave (as it does in the *Odyssey*); but, that being impossible, the scene is laid before the cave's entrance. Contrary to verisimilitude, therefore, the poet is obliged to allow Odysseus to pass in and out without let or hindrance. Why, then, does Odysseus make no attempt to escape? Euripides anticipated this query and explained Odysseus' remaining by regard for his companions' safety (479 ff.). But we are not informed why it was not equally feasible for his comrades to leave the cave and for all to be saved together. Similarly, Antigone informs Ismene that she has summoned her out of doors in order to speak with her alone (Sophocles' *Antigone* 18 f.)—as if the street were the most natural place in the world for a *tête-a-tête*! The fact is that the demands of this restriction not infrequently exceeded the playwrights' powers, when they would abandon all attempts to explain their characters' movements and coolly allow them to leave their dwellings and without apology to speak of the most confidential matters in a public place.

Nevertheless, in general they displayed an amazing fertility of

¹ Similarly Plautus *Aulularia* 133 f.:

eo nunc ego secreto ted huc foras seduxi,
ut tuam rem ego tecum hic loquerer familiarem.

invention in this particular, as a few illustrations will suffice to show. In the *Alcestis* Apollo explains his leaving Admetus' palace on the ground of the pollution which a corpse would bring upon all within the house (Euripides' *Alcestis* 22 f.), and Alcestis herself, though in a dying condition, fares forth to look for the last time upon the sun in heaven (*ibid.* 206). Oedipus is so concerned in the afflictions of his subjects that he cannot endure making inquiries through a servant but comes forth to learn the situation in person (Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* 6 f.). Karion is driven out of doors by the smoke of sacrifice upon the domestic altar (Aristophanes' *Plutus* 821 f.). In Plautus' *Mostellaria* (1 ff.) one slave is driven out of doors by another as the result of a quarrel. Agathon cannot compose his odes in the winter time, unless he bask in the sunlight (Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusa* 67 f.). The love-lorn Phaedra teases for light and air (Euripides' *Hippolytus* 181). And Medea's nurse apologizes for her soliloquizing before the house with the excuse that the sorrows within have stifled her and caused her to seek relief by proclaiming them to earth and sky (Euripides' *Medea* 56 ff.). The last pretext is often employed, and it would be interesting to know how far it is a mere expositional convention and how far it reproduces an innate feeling for and sympathy with nature among the ancients. For myself, I fear that our commentators have pressed the latter explanation unduly, and my scepticism is confirmed by the fact that Philemon ridiculed this common theatrical practice,

non ego item facio ut alios in comoediis
<ui> uidi amoris facere, qui aut Nocti aut Dii
aut Soli aut Lunae miserias narrant suas,¹

and elsewhere represented a boastful cook appealing to heaven and earth, in words which are a close parody of this *Medea* passage, to witness the excellence of his *cuisinerie* (Meineke IV, 26).

As a final illustration of the artificiality of the exterior scene I may refer to the manner in which characters are brusquely called

¹ Cf. Plautus' *Mercator* 3 ff. The question may fairly be raised whether these lines from the prologue as well as the body of the play are derived from the Greek original. Leo, at least, considers them "gut attisch" (*Plautinische Forschungen*, 136) and Philemon's parody above cited lends confirmation to this view.

out of their homes to meet the demands of the dramatic situation. Thus, in the *Iphigenia at Aulis* a messenger enters and unceremoniously shouts to his queen within doors

ὦ Τυνδαρεία παῖ, Κλυταμνήστρα, δόμων
ἔξω πέρασον, ὡς κλήης ἐμῶν λόγων (1532 f.),

and in the *Heracidae* Iolaus summons Alcmena,

ὦ μήτηρ ἐσθλοῦ παιδός, Ἀλκμήνην λέγω,
ἔξελθ', ἀκουσον τοῦσδε φιλάτους λόγους (642 f.).

To judge by such a dramatic expedient, one would suppose that the front walls of ancient houses must have been pretty thin! Perhaps the most amusing instance of this convention occurs in Plautus' *Miles Gloriosus*. In that play a slave had to be deluded into believing that two women of identical appearance lived in adjoining houses. Accordingly, he is sent first into one house and then into the other, while directions are shouted to the one woman in question to pass back and forth by means of a secret passage so as always to meet him (523 ff.). This, of course, presupposes that the walls will be thin enough for the woman to hear through but too thick for the slave to do so!

The publicity thus inevitably attending conversations of the most private nature was rendered still more incongruous by the chorus. If the exits and entrances of actors were difficult to motivate, those of the chorus were ten times worse—in fact, they were so difficult that the thing was, as we shall presently see, very rarely attempted, and the chorus was normally left uninterruptedly upon the scene to hear and see all that was said and done. How unnatural this was can be realized in Euripides' *Bacchae*, in which Pentheus arrested Dionysus and took active measures against the Bacchantes upon Mount Cithaeron and yet allowed a band of the new god's devotees (and foreigners at that) to remain practically unmolested before his palace throughout the play. What a baneful effect it had upon any complication of plot can readily be imagined. Thus, theatrical conditions forced Medea to take the chorus into her confidence, and she bases her request for their silence upon the bond of their common sex. But it is so utterly improbable that any such consideration would cause Greek women to acquiesce in a

barbarian's plans for the assassination of their sovereign's daughter that Professor Verrall¹ supposes a chorus to have been mechanically added in a subsequent revision (our present text) to a play originally written for private presentation without a chorus! Elsewhere the actor's confidence in the chorus' secrecy is more plausibly explained; as when Greek slaves because of racial ties and the promise of rescue betray their barbarian masters in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* and *Helena* in order to aid their fellow-countrywomen. Finally, this constant presence of the chorus is especially awkward in scenes like that in Euripides' *Ion* (1520 ff.), where two actors wish to speak to one another privately. Their confidences must be uttered loud enough to be heard by the 17,000 spectators, but the near-by chorus catches not a word!

The dramatic unities are a subject of perennial interest and have recently been entertainingly discussed by Professor Brander Matthews.² Perhaps I ought to say, however, that my own conclusions were formed long before the appearance of his article,³ and indeed the essential facts were recognized at least as long ago as the time of the German critic Lessing (1767).⁴ But so deep-rooted is the popular impression that the Greeks formulated these rules arbitrarily and observed them slavishly that no attempt to state the true situation can be superfluous. The current doctrine is based on the fact that the classic dramatists in France, Spain, and Italy blindly obeyed the rules as a heritage of the past, without regard to the demands of the theater at their own disposal; and, consequently, the inference has been easily and naturally drawn that the ancient practice was equally irrational.

But in the Greek theater, where there was no drop curtain, no scenery to shift, and a chorus almost continuously present, a change of scene was difficult to indicate visually. Nevertheless, Aristotle nowhere mentions the unity of place, and the Greek dramatists not infrequently violate it. The most familiar instances

¹ Cf. *Four Plays of Euripides*, 125-30.

² Cf. *Atlantic Monthly*, CV (1910), 347 ff.

³ Cf. *Chicago Record-Herald*, October 23, 1908.

⁴ Cf. *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, 369 (Miss Zimmern's trans.).

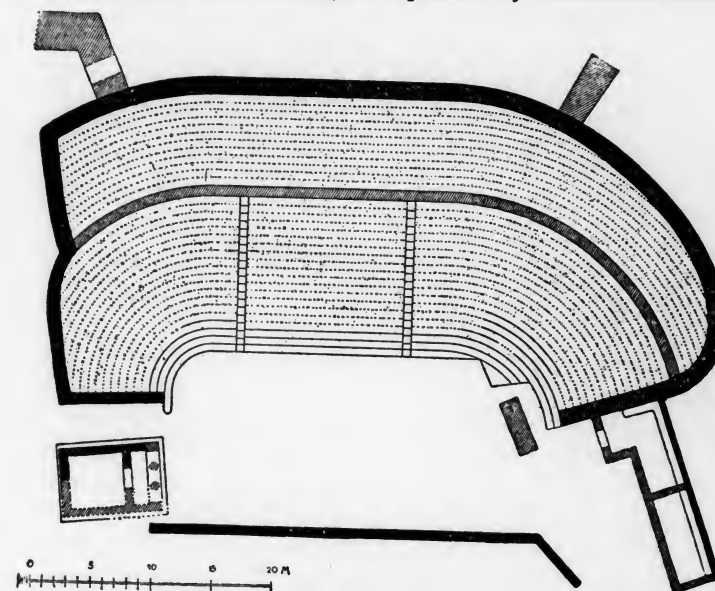
occur in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Sophocles' *Ajax*.¹ The former play opens at the temple of Apollo in Delphi, whither the avenging Furies have pursued Orestes after his mother's murder. During a momentary lapse from their watchfulness Orestes makes his escape, but the Furies soon awaken and take up the trail once more. The scene is thus left entirely vacant and is supposed to change to Athens, where all parties presently appear for the famous trial before the Council of the Areopagus. The beginning of the latter play takes place before Ajax' tent, and Sophocles wished to introduce the very unusual motive of a death scene enacted before the audience. As the presence of the chorus was an insuperable obstacle to such a theme, Ajax was allowed to leave the scene and, suspicion being soon aroused, the chorus was sent in search of him. Thus, the scene is again entirely deserted by both actors and chorus, and Ajax returns not to his tent but to some lonely spot near the seashore. This was by far the most natural and logical method of leading up to a change of scene, was infinitely superior to Shakespeare's practice in *King Henry V*, where Chorus is introduced in the prologue of each act to acquaint the spectators with the scene of the succeeding action,² but was so difficult to motivate that only some half a dozen examples are known to us in the whole Greek drama. On the other hand, such a technical device was usually not well adapted to represent considerable shifts of scene, since it would seem unnatural for so large a body of persons as the chorus always to accompany the dramatic characters to widely separated localities. To this general restriction, however, the *Eumenides* furnishes a brilliant exception, because it was the especial duty of the Furies to track the guilty Orestes wherever he might flee. In Old Comedy, ever fantastic and intentionally impossible, greater freedom was naturally allowed than in tragedy,³ so that in Aristophanes' *Frogs* no less than five different scenes are successively required.

¹ Cf. Felsch, *Quibus artificiis adhibitis poetae tragici Graeci unitates illas et temporis et loci observaverint* (1907).

² Similarly in *The Winter's Tale* Time as the chorus announces the passage of sixteen years between Acts III and IV.

³ Cf. Krause, *Quaestiones Aristophaneae Scaenicae* (1903).

At the same time, the need of such scene-shifting was largely obviated by the devices already mentioned—the *ἐκκύκλημα*, the messenger's speech, and the arbitrary transfer of interior scenes to the open air. But very commonly this unity was observed by conventionally bringing together as close neighbors structures or localities which would actually be separated by considerable inter-



PLAN OF THE THEATER AT THORICUS IN ATTICA, DATING FROM THE FIFTH CENTURY

The orchestra is bounded by a retaining wall; there is nothing to show that permanent scene buildings were ever erected. (From Dörpfeld and Reisch, *Das griechische Theater*.)

vals. Thus, the tomb of Agamemnon would naturally stand at some distance from his palace, and incidental statements in the plays confirm this view; nevertheless, in Aeschylus' *Choepori* palace and tomb stand within a few feet of each other. Exactly the same sort of incongruous juxtaposition occurs also in Euripides' *Helena*, and many similar instances could be cited. Slightly different but no less efficacious is the method of procedure in the

Persians. For dramatic effect Aeschylus wished to introduce the ghost of Darius which, according to ancient notions on the subject, could not wander far from its tomb. But the real grave of Darius was probably at Persepolis, and under the conditions supposed the Persian elders, the royal messenger, and Xerxes himself would not naturally resort thither. Consequently, without the slightest compunction, Aeschylus transferred the dead monarch's tomb to Susa! Since several dramatic expedients subserved the unity of time as well as that of place, consideration of them will be deferred until that topic is reached. In concluding this paragraph I may mention one especially amusing artifice—in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* Orestes has left the scene and is now supposed to be some distance away. Notwithstanding, Athena (the *deus ex machina*) addresses him and apologetically adds: "For, though absent, you hear my voice, since I am a goddess" (1447).

Likewise, the unity of time arose not from the whim of ancient writers but from the same theatrical arrangements which resulted in the unity of place, viz., the absence of a drop curtain and the continuous presence of the chorus. Under these conditions an intermission for the imaginary lapse of time could be secured only by the withdrawal of the chorus—a difficult and rarely feasible expedient, as already explained—and without such intermissions the constant and long-continued presence of the same persons in the same place without food or slumber involved a patent absurdity. It is true that the choral songs were roughly equivalent to the modern intermission and that after them the action is often farther advanced than the actual time required for chanting them would warrant. Thus, during a single stasimon of Aeschylus' *Suppliants* (ll. 524-99) the Argive king must leave the scene, summon his subjects to public assembly, state the object of the meeting, and allow discussion before the final vote—all in time for Danaus to report the people's decision at the beginning of the following episode. Nevertheless, the fact remains that such acceleration was comparatively slight and can be paralleled from dramatists who owned no allegiance to these unities—note, for example, the striking of the half-hour every twenty or twenty-five lines at the close of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. No such explanation can

account for so violent a condensation of time as occurs in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. At the play's opening the guard sights the signal fire which announces the capture of Troy, and within a few hundred lines Agamemnon has finished the sack, traversed the Aegean, and appeared before his palace! No hint is given, however, that there is anything unusual about all this, and the action is without hesitation compressed into one day.

In this connection, it ought to be observed that, when a modern playwright like Pinero restricts his action to one day and represents the lapse of several hours by the fall of the curtain between acts, he does not thereby observe the unity of time in the Greek sense; for to the Greeks, inasmuch as there were normally performers before the audience throughout, it meant at least a *semblance* of continuity of action. It is, therefore, somewhat remarkable that Professor Verrall, who fully recognizes the dependence of this unity upon local conditions and has published eminently sensible observations on the subject,¹ has nevertheless felt constrained to challenge the obvious interpretation of two plays in which a glaring violation of the unity of time occurs. In the *Agamemnon* he supposes the watchman and the populace (including the chorus) to be misinformed as to the meaning of the beacon and that it really served to Clytemnestra, Aegisthus, and their supporters as a warning of Agamemnon's being close at hand! And his elucidation of the *Andromache* of Euripides is still more ingenious and complicated.²

But to bolster up such interpretations Professor Verrall must proceed to explain away all similar instances as well—to explain, for example, how in Euripides' *Suppliants* an Attic army can march from Eleusis to the vicinity of Thebes and fight a battle there and how tidings of the victory can be brought back to Eleusis all between vss. 598 and 634 and, again, how Philocrates can travel from Aetolia to Elis and return between vss. 452 and 922 of Plautus' *Captivi*. Nevertheless, not the slightest attention is paid to these patent absurdities and the whole action is in each case unmistakably supposed to fall within a single day.

¹ Cf. his edition of Euripides' *Ion*, pp. xlviii ff.

² Cf. the introduction to his edition of the *Agamemnon*, and *Four Plays of Euripides*, pp. 1-42.

In view of the foregoing we are not surprised that Aristotle does mention the unity of time, though only incidentally; but he rather commends it as something which works out well in practice than enjoins it as an invariable rule. His exact language is: "They differ, again, in their length: for Tragedy endeavours, as far as possible, to confine itself to a single revolution (*περίοδος*) of the sun, or but slightly to exceed this limit; whereas the Epic action has no limits of time" (Butcher). In actual practice this restriction was further reduced in most cases to the hours of daylight, and some have even maintained that *περίοδος ἡλίου* means but twelve hours. But we have at least one example of the dramatic action beginning in the late afternoon of one day and not concluding until the next day—Terence's *Heauton Timoroumenos*.

It remains to consider some of the expedients which the poets found useful in solving the difficulties (both of time and of place) caused by local conditions.¹ In the first place, the practice of writing a series of three plays on the same general subject often enabled the playwright to distribute his incidents in different places and time spheres without loss of verisimilitude, for a whole trilogy was no longer than the average modern play and each tragedy would thus correspond to a single act and, since the chorus was withdrawn at the close of each play in the trilogy and its place taken by another entirely different, changes of time and place between plays were absolutely without restriction. Thus, 30,000 years (!) elapse between the *Prometheus Bound* and *Prometheus Unbound* of Aeschylus, and the scene changes from Scythia to the Caucasus; and the pertinent facts of similar import concerning the Oresteian trilogy will at once occur to everyone.

We have already observed the difficulty of plausibly motivating exits and entrances in ancient plays, but no less difficulty was involved in unobtrusively acquainting the audience with just those facts necessary for an intelligent understanding of the drama. In the second place, therefore, the ancient poets frequently satisfied the demands of these two unities by setting their expositions at times and places which would naturally be different. Even such

¹ In addition to Felsch and Krause, cf. Polczyk, *De unitatibus et loci et temporis in nova comoedia observatis* (1909).

a master of dramatic technique as Sophocles represented Orestes as communicating to his fellow-conspirators the result of his inquiry at Delphi only after they had reached Argos (*Electra* 32 ff.) and as waiting to formulate a definite plan of action until they were in the most unfavorable place in all the world for such a purpose—before Clytemnestra's palace (*ibid.* 15 ff.). The latter incongruity does not occur in Euripides' version of the same story because the scene of that play is laid not in the city of Argos but before Electra's hut in the country.

One of the most striking peculiarities of Euripidean technique is the prologue in which with very slight regard for dramatic illusion a character in a monologue sets forth the essential antecedents of the action. Whatever other explanations may be advanced for this innovation, whether inability or disinclination to follow his predecessors' model, the necessity of indicating such radical departures from earlier tradition as were postulated for his version, desire for clearness or brevity of exposition, fondness for rhetorical display, a wish to exploit antiquarian lore, to forecast the course of the action, or what not, this consideration must also be allowed a certain weight, viz., that it enabled him to rehearse events of the most diverse nature without violating the unities of time and place. This form is employed in all Euripides' extant plays and, though severely criticized both in ancient and in modern times, was borrowed by Sophocles in his *Trachiniae*,² extensively imitated by Aristophanes³ despite his caustic criticisms, and was exceedingly popular among the writers of the New Comedy.

In the last place, also at the close of his plays Euripides frequently used an expedient whereby he surmounted the customary restrictions of time and place—the *deus ex machina*. In the hands of an unskilful dramatist this contrivance served as a final recourse when he had involved his plot beyond the possibility of disentanglement by natural means, and it is frequently charged that such was the Euripidean practice—but most unjustly. He resorted to this

² Cf. Kaibel's introduction to his edition of Sophocles' *Electra*, p. 65: "Deianeira hat für ihr Auftreten keinen anderen Grund, als dass das Stück beginnt, für ihre Erzählung keinen andren, als dass das Publikum unterrichtet sein will."

³ Cf. Starkie's edition of Aristophanes' *Wasps*, pp. x f., and note 6.

device nine times in the extant and at least twice in the lost plays; and in the *Orestes* alone is it frankly and undisguisedly employed to relieve the poet from his embarrassment, and even in this instance the theophany is no more necessary than it is in a play by Sophocles, the *Philoctetes*. In all the other examples the *deus ex machina* serves mainly to foretell events beyond the time and action of the drama. Thus, in the *Andromache* the difficulties of the plot are entirely solved before Thetis' appearance, and she merely gives directions for Neoptolemus' burial and prophesies the future of Peleus, Andromache, and Molossus and of the latter's posterity.¹

We have seen that the unities of time and place are largely due to the striving for illusion in a theater comparatively bare of scenery and of facilities for scene-shifting. Conversely, their observance in the modern theater with its ample scenic provision would naturally militate against the scenic extravagance of which the present-day theatocracy is so enamored. Thus, it would seem that the much-abused unities are not without a meaning and truly artistic tendency even today, for some of the most significant influences in the contemporaneous drama are directed against excesses in this line; witness (*inter alia*) Ben Greet's Woodland Players and the New Theater's revival of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. Even a modern producer, Mr. Henry W. Savage, includes the following in his advice to a young playwright:² "Do not distribute your scenes so widely that you have one on an island, another at Herald Square, and a third at Chicago. Make the action of your play take place all in one day, if possible." In other words, the unity of time expressly and an approximation to the unity of place.

The unity of action is the only one that is universal, since it alone springs from the inmost nature of the drama. Yet even here local conditions make themselves felt. The modern playwright, free (if he pleases and has a producer complaisant enough) to change the scene ten times within a single act and with superior facilities for motivating entrances and exits, delights in shifting different sets

¹ A very interesting account of the *deus ex machina* and prologue in Euripides can be found in Decharme's *Euripides and the Spirit of His Dramas* (Loeb's translation), pp. 264 ff. and 273 ff. respectively (1906).

² Cf. *The Bookman*, XXX (1909), 37.

of characters back and forth and thus secures an alternation of light and shade, an intermingling of comedy and tragedy quite beyond the ancient dramatist's reach. The preceding discussion has shown the immobility of the ancient theater in these respects and, consequently, one reason why the Greeks ruthlessly excluded everything that was not strictly germane to their action.

This unity, it is needless to say, Aristotle recognized and discussed at length. Among other things he pointed out that epic poetry has an advantage in that it can present many events simultaneously transacted, while the drama is restricted to but one. A curious violation of this self-evident principle has recently occurred in our contemporaneous drama. Toward the end of Act II in Eugene Walter's *Paid in Full* Emma Brooks is disclosed making an appointment with Captain Williams over the telephone. In the next act we are transferred to Captain Williams' quarters, and the dramatic clock has in the meanwhile been turned back some fifteen minutes, for presently the telephone bell rings and the same appointment is made over again. In other words, Act III partially overlaps Act II in time, but the scene is different. It can scarcely be denied that the dramatic situation has been enhanced by this device, but this gain has been secured at the sacrifice of verisimilitude and dramatic illusion.

Though it is on all sides admitted that the unity of action is the *sine qua non* of dramatic composition, many fail to realize the meaning and extent of its limitation. Aristotle indicated a mistaken notion current in his day (and likewise in ours) in the following words: "The unity of a plot does not consist, as some suppose, in its having one man as its subject. An infinity of things befall that one man, some of which it is impossible to reduce to unity; and in like manner there are many actions of one man which cannot be made to form one action. One sees, therefore, the mistake of all the poets who have written a *Heracleid*, a *Theseid*, or similar poems; they suppose that, because Heracles was one man, the story also of Heracles must be one story" (Bywater). Freytag has discussed the matter with keen discrimination and exemplifies it by showing how Shakespeare remodeled the more or less chaotic story of Romeo and Juliet's love into a unified plot whose incidents

follow one another almost as inevitably as Fate. The passage is unfortunately too long for quotation here, but is highly instructive.¹

Thus, the Greek masters were so far from evolving unities out of their inner consciousness or from observing them invariably that they constantly violated the unities of time and place in both letter and spirit. Their practice throughout simply reacted to theatrical conditions as they found them. It has remained for their successors, whose theater has for the most part been quite dissimilar, to observe the unities with a literalness and exactness such as never characterized the first disciples of the doctrine. That both ancients and moderns have produced masterpieces under these restrictions is, of course, a truism. In fact, some of our most impressive recent plays, such as Kennedy's *Servant in the House*, have conformed to them. That many modern plays would have been improved by observing them is doubtless also true. As Professor Thorndike² says: "Stage illusion and precision of effect may be aided by an observance of the unities, and by the limitation of the action to a single plot, a few persons, and a few scenes—Shakespeare and encomiasts of his art to the contrary notwithstanding. . . . The pseudo-classicists erred mainly in taking their rules as masters instead of as guides." But that the unities should be arbitrarily imposed upon every drama without exception is absurd, since the theatrical conditions that called them forth are no longer the same. That Aeschylus and Sophocles, if present with us in the flesh, would occasionally avail themselves of the greater flexibility and adaptability of the modern theater, I cannot doubt. At any rate, that restless spirit, Euripides, would certainly have gloried in its freedom.

¹ Cf. *Technique of the Drama* (MacEwan's trans.), 30 ff.

² Cf. *Tragedy*, 313 (1908).

